

Rise of a Woman: A Reading of Phoolan Devi's *I, Phoolan Devi the Autobiography of India's Bandit Queen*

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Abstract

Dalit literature has emerged as a significant genre in the post-independence era. It has particularly gained prominence from the 1960s onward. Dalit literary movement often takes the form of personal confessions, serving as a powerful Dalit revelation of caste and social inequities. Over time, Dalit writing has evolved into a distinct trend characterized by its unique aesthetics and themes by reflecting the lived experiences of Dalit communities. Contemporary Dalit literature not only articulates the struggles against systemic oppression but also transforms traditional literary aesthetics. It challenges and redefines the parameters that traditionally govern literature, pushing boundaries to incorporate voices that have historically been silenced. This genre emphasizes authenticity and emotional depth, providing insight into the realities faced by Dalit individuals and communities. By foregrounding the lived experiences of Dalits, these writings invite readers to reconsider established literary norms and question dominant narratives. They highlight issues of caste, identity, and social justice, aiming to create a more inclusive understanding of literature. In doing so, Dalit writers contribute to a broader discourse that seeks to address social inequities and promote a more equitable society. As a result, Dalit literature has not only carved out its own space in the literary world but also serves as a catalyst for change, encouraging new forms of expression and understanding within the broader cultural landscape.

Dalit autobiography represents a vital facet of emerging literary genres, and offers a powerful platform for self-expression. Through memoirs, autobiographies, religious narratives, personal accounts, and family stories, Dalits are documenting

their daily experiences and struggles. These narratives serve as a critical response to the caste discrimination they face, addressing its foundations in diverse and impactful ways. In the realm of autobiographical writing, the experiences recounted become irrefutable truths, as no one possesses a deeper understanding of these realities than the individuals themselves. Dalit autobiographies play a pivotal role in articulating selfhood, identity, and the assertion of agency among Dalits who strive to raise their voices against the various forms of subjugation and oppression they encounter. These personal narratives not only recount personal histories but also illuminate broader social injustices, fostering a collective awareness of the Dalit experience. By sharing their life narratives, Dalit writers challenge the dominant narratives that have historically marginalized them. Dalit narratives create a space for dialogue and understanding. This genre empowers individuals to assert their identities and experiences, transforming personal suffering into a collective call for justice and recognition. Ultimately, Dalit autobiographies not only document the past but also inspire future generations to continue the struggle for equality and dignity in society. Through this literary form, Dalits reclaim their narratives and challenge the structures that have perpetuated their marginalization.

Dalit narratives extend beyond seeking their own liberation. They also challenge all forms of systemic oppression embedded within social institutions. This includes a strong stance against discrimination and inequalities based on gender, caste, class, and religion. Through their voices, Dalit writers and activists confront a wide spectrum of injustices, advocating for broader social change that dismantles entrenched hierarchies and prejudices. These narratives not only aim to liberate Dalits but to promote an inclusive society by critiquing and resisting oppressive structures that marginalize various groups. Thus, Dalit narratives stand as powerful testimonies against all forms of institutionalized oppression. The paper seeks to examine *Rise of a Woman: A Reading of Phoolan Devi's I, Phoolan Devi the Autobiography of India's Bandit Queen*.

Key words: Dalit, caste Hindus, gender oppression, inequality, exploitation.

Introduction:

It is essential to bring the life stories of marginalized/out castes/underprivileged/Daits individuals from history into the spotlight, and among these are many remarkable women whose lives have been overshadowed by societal constraints. Some of these women, while controversial and not always viewed as traditional role models, reflect the resilience and complexity of rising against a backdrop of patriarchy and pervasive oppression. Their life stories reveal how women defied the odds, challenging the rigid societal structures that have held them back. Phoolan Devi's life story exemplifies this struggle. Having known widely as the 'Bandit Queen,' Phoolan Devi remains one of the most infamous figures in Indian history. Her life, marked by both tragedy and triumph, reveals the harsh realities faced by women from marginalized communities, particularly those from lower castes, in a society dominated by rigid social hierarchies. Jayshree writes, "She is a victim of the cultures, structures and institutions of oppression, both externally and internally. This manifests in perpetual violence against Dalit women" (Jayshree Mangubhai, Hathras case). Phoolan's experiences of extreme hardship and violence shaped her actions and transformed her into a figure both feared and admired. Born into a lower-caste family in rural India, Phoolan has faced oppression from a young age, enduring poverty, abuse, and numerous injustices. These circumstances ultimately have driven her to take on a life that defied societal expectations and norms. Devi says, "Every day I have lived with fear" (Devi, 2014). Although her life is marred by violence, Phoolan Devi's journey has eventually led her to achieve what seemed impossible: a transition from a feared bandit to a member of India's Parliament. Her rise to political power is extraordinary, especially considering the social constraints of caste and gender that normally prevents a Dalit woman from attaining such a position. While her methods and choices may not align with conventional ideals of heroism, Phoolan's story undeniably reflects the resilience of women who, despite adversity and societal oppression, find ways to resist and redefine their paths. Her autobiography serves as a crucial narrative that illuminates the realities of oppression and the courage it takes to break free from it. Phoolan Devi's life reminds us of the significant, often unspoken, challenges faced by marginalized women.

Phoolan Devi's life (1963–2001) is marked by hardship and unimaginable suffering. The narrative is far from joyful or lighthearted which makes it both challenging and painful to recount. Born into poverty in a rural, lower-caste, Dalit,

family, Phoolan's life quickly takes a dark turn. At the very young age of eleven, she is sold off into marriage, a common practice in her village but devastating nonetheless. Her husband is much older and treats her with cruelty and violence. Phoolan writes: "I didn't know he was a demon, and that despite the promises he made to my parents he wanted to carry me off the day after the ceremony. Until then, life had been hard. It comprised beatings, hunger, and tears, but also laughter and hope" (Devi, 2014). Phoolan, despite her youth, has the strength and courage to break away from this abusive marriage. However, her returning home does not bring her the support or solace she may have hoped for. Instead, her family and community view her return as a source of deep shame. In their eyes, her actions are rebellious and unacceptable, a stain on the family's honor, and they have shunned her.

This rejection has only marked the beginning of the hardships Phoolan would face. She becomes a target of relentless abuse and exploitation, facing horrific violations at the hands of those meant to uphold justice. Jayshree Mangubhai writes, "We are victims of violence because we are poor, lower caste and women, so looked down upon by all" (Jayshree Mangubhai, Hathras Case). In a shocking abuse of power, police officers subjected her to brutal gang rapes, further intensifying her trauma. These experiences are compounded by the constant spread of damaging rumors about her character. Jayshree's views are precisely correct. She writes, "There is no one to help or speak for us. We face more sexual violence because we don't have any power" (Jayshree Mangubhai, Hathras Case). People around her accused her of being a prostitute, a baseless claim that has intensified the scorn and isolation she has experienced within her community. Phoolan says: "The villagers who had seen me arrive hadn't been able to keep their noses to themselves ... One of them had jeered at me. 'How many did you sleep with?'" (Devi, 2014). Phoolan is cast aside, her reputation smeared by falsehoods and prejudice. These rumors and accusations are not just rumors to her. They become weapons used to discredit her. They strip her of her dignity and isolate her further from the people she once has known.

Phoolan Devi possesses a spirit that refuses to be subdued. Despite the immense pain, humiliation, and suffering, she refuses to be silenced. She does not accept the fate which has imposed upon her by society or by those who have sought to control her life. "Their subordinate position is exploited by those in power who carry out their attacks with impunity." (Attacks on Dalit Women: A Pattern of

Impunity). Phoolan's defiance in the face of such intense oppression leads her eventual kidnapping by a gang of bandits. Instead of being crushed by this new ordeal, her time among the bandits becomes a turning point in her life. She begins to fight back, channeling her pain and anger into a fierce resistance against those who have wronged her. This moment becomes a defining turning point in Phoolan's life, one that nobody could have predicted. She has been kidnapped by a notorious bandit gang, and in such a situation, her chances of survival are slim. Rashida Manjoo says, "The reality of Dalit women and girls is one of exclusion and marginalisation ... They are often victims of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights violations, including sexual abuse and violence. They are often displaced; pushed into forced and/or bonded labour, prostitution and trafficking". (Rashida Manjoo, 2020). In fact, captives are mistreated or killed, and as a young woman in the hands of bandits, Phoolan is especially vulnerable. But, in an unforeseen twist, she has found an ally in Vikram, the second-in-command of the gang. Rather than treating her cruelly as others do, Vikram sees something unique in Phoolan: a strength and resilience that sets her apart. He sympathizes with her and sees her as more than a mere captive. As time passes, Vikram's protective instincts toward Phoolan only grow stronger. It is a relationship that none of the other gang members has anticipated, and it soon has transformed both their lives.

In a dramatic move that has demonstrated his loyalty and commitment to Phoolan, Vikram has taken the drastic step of killing the gang's leader, who is also her greatest threat. This act is both bold and dangerous, as the gang leader is feared and respected. But, Vikram sees it as necessary to ensure Phoolan's safety and, in the process, paved the way for both their ascents. With the gang leader out of the picture, Vikram steps into the top position, taking full control of the bandit gang. His loyalty to Phoolan continues to shape their relationship, and her circumstances radically begin to change. Now, under the protection of the new leader, Phoolan's role in the gang is shifted from that of a mere captive to a position of increasing influence and authority. Her partnership with Vikram allows her to rise in power, a development that seems unimaginable and has given her background and the adversities she has faced. Phoolan's rapid transformation becomes an extraordinary story of survival and defiance. She goes from a helpless captive to a formidable figure within the gang. This unlikely alliance with Vikram grants her not only protection but also an

unexpected sense of control and influence. Her story thus becomes a powerful testament to her resilience and resourcefulness that defines her life and reputation.

As she rose within the ranks, Phoolan's journey takes on a new meaning. Each twist and turn adds layers to her story, marking her not just as a survivor but as a figure who commands respect and inspire fear. Her reputation as a strong and determined woman grows, and she begins to be seen as a person whose courage and fierce drives her forward despite the odds. Her defiance of the fate others has expected for her marked her as a truly formidable figure. Phoolan's unexpected rise from captive to a powerful presence within the gang becomes a key chapter in her life. She not only alters the course of her own life but also defies societal expectations, demonstrating an unbreakable spirit. Her journey is one of inner strength, courage, and resilience, as she defies the destiny that consumes her, marking her as a woman who holds back by her circumstances.

This pivotal moment marks the beginning of Phoolan's life as one of India's most infamous bandits. Having been transformed by her hardships and the violent world around her, Phoolan soon gains a powerful reputation. Her followers begin to see her as a reincarnation of the fierce Hindu goddess Durga, a symbol of strength and wrath. With a drive rooted in both survival and revenge, Phoolan quickly becomes involved in a wide range of criminal activities. She orchestrates kidnappings, robs trains, and conducts raids that earn her respect and fear. While her defiance of authority becomes well-known, her actions go beyond mere banditry. Phoolan has a deeply personal agenda, targeting those who have wronged or abused her in the past. Her rise as a bandit queen is fueled by a determination to settle old scores, marking her as a complex figure whose motivations blend revenge with rebellion.

But, Phoolan's path is fraught with tragedy and brutal setbacks. Her protector, partner, and close ally Vikram is eventually killed in an ambush, leaving her without her primary support in the gang. Vikram's death not only makes her vulnerable but also leaves her exposed to the violence of rival groups. Not long after Vikram's passing, Phoolan is captured by a group of men who seek revenge. During her captivity, she endures three weeks of unimaginable suffering, subjected to daily gang-rape and brutal treatment at the hands of her captors. Devi says, "They fell on me like wolves. They dragged me and picked me up and fell and they dragged me up by my

hair again ... I was naked in front of them ... I prayed to the gods and goddesses to help me, to let me live, to let me run through the damp fields ..." (Devi, 2014). The trauma from this harrowing period leaves deep physical and emotional scars. Yet, Phoolan's spirit remains unbroken. Despite her ordeal, she clings to her resilience and manages to escape. Vanishing from the public eye, Phoolan hides herself to recover and plan her next moves in secret. For seventeen months, Phoolan lives under the radar, determine to reemerge stronger. The memories of her past suffering and the relentless abuse she has endured fueled her desire for vengeance. When she finally resurfaces, she is not the same woman who has disappeared; she has transformed into a fearless leader with her own gang, and has prepared to face her enemies and make them pay for the horrors they have inflicted on her. Now, as a leader herself, she commands a group that shares her thirst for retribution. Her focus is set on those who have exploited her vulnerability and inflicted such suffering upon her.

With her new band of followers, Phoolan meticulously plans and executes her revenge. The men responsible for her torment become the targets of her rage, and she takes justice into her own hands. Her fierce come back, marked by calculated and forceful acts of revenge, sent shockwaves through the region. No longer simply a victim, Phoolan emerges as a symbol of unyielding strength, her actions redefining her image from that of a captive to a powerful figure who has wielded control over her own fate. Phoolan's journey from victim to outlaw leader becomes legendary, a tale of resilience and defiance in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. Her relentless pursuit of justice for her suffering cements her place in India's outlaw history. Her name becomes synonymous with both vengeance and empowerment, marking her legacy as a woman who refuses to be broken and instead becomes a symbol of fierce independence.

Phoolan Devi's journey continues as she grows into a figure both feared and admired, gaining fame as a modern-day female Robin Hood. Her life as a bandit is not driven solely by a desire for wealth but by a powerful sense of justice. Having known for stealing from the rich to support the poor and oppressed, she quickly becomes a symbol for the downtrodden. Phoolan's approach is not just about redistribution; she positions herself as a fierce protector of women and a defender of those wronged by society. She earns a reputation for showing no mercy toward rapists and often goes out of her way to liberate women trapped in enslavement or abusive

circumstances. Her growing influence among the lower classes gives her a Robin Hood-like appeal, though her methods are far more ruthless than the romanticized stories of folklore. Phoolan writes: "I had taken money from the rich and given it to the poor; I had helped girls to marry by paying their dowries; I had punished rapists and land-grabbers and informers. I was the one who could hold the head up with honour, I was the one who stood and fought" (Devi, 2014). One of the most defining and controversial moments in Phoolan's life is the infamous Behmai massacre. Phoolan leads an attack on Behmai, the village where she has been held captive, tortured, and repeatedly raped by a group of men. UN Special Rapporteur writes, "Rape and sexual violence against Dalit women is often accompanied with other forms of violence such as gang rape, murder, assault, kidnapping, social boycott, mass attack, arson, false case, witch hunting, abetment to suicide, etc" (Rashida Manjoo, 2020). Her drive for vengeance is unstoppable; this raid is her way of confronting her darkest memories and settling scores with those who has brutalized her. She and her gang execute twenty two men, whom she holds responsible for her suffering. This act is her declaration of justice on her own terms, a bloody and unyielding statement of power from someone who has once been a helpless victim. The massacre sends shockwaves across India, capturing both horror and fascination, as Phoolan Devi has emerged not just as a bandit but as an avenger, a woman who has taken her justice by force. Following Behmai, Phoolan becomes the subject of one of the largest manhunts in Indian history. Authorities are relentless in their pursuit, yet she skillfully evades capture for two years, staying one step ahead as she navigates the dense forests and rural hideouts. While she is branded an outlaw, her legend grows, and stories of her exploits spreads across the country. For many, she becomes a symbol of resistance against societal oppression, an unlikely hero (ine) whose actions are driven by her own moral code. Her life story resonates with those who has also suffered under the weight of injustice and inspired admiration, especially among marginalized communities.

In February 1983, however, Phoolan's time on the run comes to an end, but not through capture. She chooses to surrender voluntarily, marking a pivotal change in her life. Her decision to give herself up is influenced by the news that her chief tormentor, the man responsible for both Vikram's death and her own suffering, has died. With him gone, her most personal vendetta has been resolved, and Phoolan's drive for revenge has run its course. This moment marks a transition in her identity,

from a bandit queen and outlaws to a figure more complex, a symbol of defiance, resilience, and retribution. Phoolan's life has been filled with violence and pain, but her surrender marked the beginning of her journey as a cultural icon, one who has represented both vengeance and justice. Her story has etched itself into India's collective memory, transforming her from a feared bandit into a powerful figure whose legacy resonates far beyond her years as an outlaw.

Phoolan Devi's life takes many unexpected turns, each marking a moment of defiance and resilience against the injustices that has defined her existence. After being imprisoned for eleven years for her role in the Behmai massacre, Phoolan is eventually pardoned. She could have chosen a quiet life after her release, but instead, she has made the bold decision to enter politics. Phoolan's transition from notorious bandit to politician is nothing short of remarkable, and she has succeeded in carving out a space for herself in a male-dominated world. Her political career is a testament to her ability to reshape her identity and continue to fight for what she has believed in, despite the obstacles that often stood in her way. Manisha writes, "Dalit women are uniting against one of the world's most gruesome and effective systems of oppression, the intersection of caste and gender discrimination" (Manisha, IDSN). Her narrative, though, is not one of fairy-tale success or happiness. Phoolan Devi's life embodies the enduring struggles of women, particularly in India, where gender inequality is pervasive and the caste system continues to limit opportunities for those born into lower castes. Phoolan's early life is marked by violence, oppression, and discrimination. As a woman from a low-caste background, she is subjected to multiple layers of systemic injustice, suffering at the hands of those who hold power over her. Devi writes, "I alone knew what I had suffered. I alone knew what it felt like to be alive but dead" (Devi, 2014). These struggles are far from unique to Phoolan. In many parts of India, women especially those from lower castes continue to face tremendous barriers of inequality and opportunity. Dalit women across the country are subjected to frequent rapes since time immemorial. They are subjected to rape because the religious system branded them socially and culturally unequal and inferior. Therefore, the caste Hindu men take it as an advantage on Dalit women. Tapan Basu writes about rape of the Dalit girls in villages, "The upper caste people thought as they have every right to rape poor and backward people's daughters" (Basu, 2002). Phoolan's life story is a stark reminder of the ways in which these entrenched social systems work to suppress and silence the most vulnerable.

Despite the suffering she has endured, Phoolan's story is one of resistance, a refusal to accept the oppressive systems in place. Unlike many who have suffered in silence or resigned themselves to their fate, Phoolan has fought back in the only way she has known how. She takes justice into her own hands, choosing a path outside the law to right the wrongs done to her. By leading a gang of outlaws, she defies not just social norms but also the very structures of power that has kept her and others like her in chains. Her decision to fight outside the legal system, though violent and controversial, is a direct challenge to the systemic oppression she has faced, and for many, she becomes a symbol of justice in a world where the law has often failed the most marginalized. Her transformation from an oppressed young girl into the notorious 'Bandit Queen' is extraordinary. As she becomes a feared figure in the Indian countryside, Phoolan's story has evolved from one of victimhood to one of empowerment. Her acts of rebellion, though often bloody and violent, are motivated by a desire for vengeance, justice, and equality. Phoolan's rise to power is a direct response to the sexual violence and systemic oppression she has experienced. She is not merely a bandit; she is a symbol of resistance, a woman who has defied the odds and turned her suffering into strength. Maya Pandit's views are very much apt in this regard, "... The readers should not feel ashamed of this history. I have tried to sketch a portrait of the actual life of the Dalits and the dignities they were subjected to. I am writing this history for my sons, and daughters to show them how the community suffered because of the chains of slavery and so that they realise what ordeals of fire the Dalits have passed through" (Pandit, 2008). Phoolan's legacy endures because of her extraordinary courage and determination. Though her actions are controversial and her life far from conventional, Phoolan Devi stands as a beacon of hope for countless marginalized women. She shows that it is possible to fight against overwhelming odds and rise above the societal constraints imposed upon her. Her life is a testament to the power of resilience and the importance of fighting for justice, no matter the cost. Phoolan's story continues to inspire women, particularly those from oppressed communities, to find their own voices and stand up for themselves in a society that often seeks to silence them. Her life is not just a story of vengeance, but of transformation of a woman who refuses to accept a life of powerlessness and instead has forged her own path toward empowerment.

Conclusion

Phoolan Devi's story is a testament to the resilience and courage that one woman, under extraordinary circumstances, displayed. Despite facing unimaginable abuse and betrayal, she fights against the confines of her caste, gender, and social status. Her narrative highlights the grim reality of the intersecting forms of oppression women from marginalized communities endure. Phoolan's life illustrates how systemic prejudice, patriarchal norms, and abuse of power can crush an individual. Yet, her refusal to submit reminds us of the indomitable strength of those who dare to rise above their circumstances. Though her life is one of the struggles, Phoolan Devi ultimately becomes a symbol of resilience and defiance, an example of how even the most marginalized can fight back and challenge the forces that seek to oppress them.

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